

GRACE MOMENTS

TELL ME A STORY

TIME OF
GRACE[™]
WITH PASTOR MARK JESKE



BY PASTOR MARK JESKE

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*Daily readings written to provide
you with straight talk and real hope.*

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Direct quotations from the
Bible (NIV) are printed in **bold**.

Foreword

“I learn by analogy.” When I was in college, I heard an older student say that. At the time I didn’t know what he meant. Now I do.

Already as a young man that student had realized that he (and most of the rest of humanity, truth be told) preferred to learn by listening to stories, to narratives with real people and real experiences in them, rather than by a series of abstractions (even if true).

Is that so surprising? Since we were small children, burrowed into our mothers’ laps, we have craved stories. We didn’t ask our mothers to read us essays, statistical analyses, or dogmatics texts. “Tell me a story, Mama,” we would say.

Stories help us learn things sideways, by looking at the lives and experiences of other people. That’s

what two important Greek-derived words mean: *analogy*, which studies commonalities between two people or things, and *parable*, which is a story “alongside” our own lives.

Most of the really great teachers in history have been storytellers. The best of all was our Lord Jesus, whose approximately three dozen parables in the four Gospels are renowned not only in Bible studies but resonate through all literature. Here are four of his most famous. Let the Master teach you about yourself, your God, his aching love for you, and his important plans for you.

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STORY #1: *The Rich Man and Poor Lazarus*

i-ro-ny (ī're-nē) n., pl. – **nies** Incongruity between what might be expected and what actually occurs.

How delicious – a wealthy jerk eats his dainty morsels, ignoring the sick, starving beggar who has to fight the dogs for the scraps. But this no-name plutocrat ends up in hell, and the beggar, whose name now symbolizes “rags to riches,” is taken to endless glory.

You can see why this is one of the most famous of Jesus' parables. You will never forget it.

Movies that do well at the box office and sell a lot of DVDs portray characters whom people want to identify with. What are your top three? The biggest sellers tend to portray strong action heroes for the guys and tender love stories with meaningful dialogue for the women.

Jesus' stories pull you right in, just like great movies, because he understands the human situation so well. And even though we've all been pampered at one time or another, it's not with the rich man that we resonate in this story. We head straight for Lazarus because our own pain memories are so strong.

There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day. At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores and longing to eat what fell from the rich man's table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores (Luke 16:19-21).

Our ancestors' rebellion against God became a congenital birth defect. Through our human flesh and blood we are bonded with Adam and Eve not only physically, but with their terrible sin as well. Every time we sin we affirm their horrible choice.

A triple curse came upon the human race when they (and we) sinned. The first is *pain*. No one escapes. Everybody hurts. Lazarus hurt. We hurt.

“You must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die,” God told Adam. “You will not surely die,” Satan told Eve. They ate. Satan lied. In a flash, immortal Adam and Eve became mortal. *Mortal* is a polite word to describe the process whereby cell death begins to creep through our tissues and veins.

Physical death is the second part of the curse. Death is not natural or beautiful or normal. It is a sick, violent intruder into God’s paradise. Death is not just part of Mufasa’s lovely “cycle of life” in *The Lion King*. It is Part II of God’s severe punishment upon his traitorous, mutinous creatures.

The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham’s side. The rich man also died and was buried (Luke 16:22).

We’re all afraid of death. That’s why we have so many jokes about it. That’s why we spend such staggering amounts of money staving it off. That’s why Jesus’ hearers leaned closer – because he was describing the fate that awaits us all, rich and poor alike.

That’s why Jesus’ incarnation was necessary. He became fully human in order to have a body that could die like ours, that could die for us. His mortality becomes the gateway to our immortality, where we can be reunited with him and Abraham and all believers.

The third and final portion of the Curse is condemnation to an eternity in hell, first in soul and then soul and body. People today don’t appear to take it seriously; after all, no one has ever seen the real thing and come back to tell about it. The word *hell* is either an adult spice word for emphasis, or else the scene of *The Far Side* cartoons where a red-suited devil with a pitchfork and horns bosses unhappy people around. It seems that most Americans, and sadly many Christians, don’t believe in a literal hell.

Jesus did. He helped design it – a place of endless desolation, torment, hatred, and despair. Jesus did – he experienced it on the cross so that he could release us from its threat. Jesus did – and he described its misery in this parable:

In hell, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side. So he called to him, “Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire” (Luke 16:23-24).

Do you get it? Even the small relief brought by a drink of water will be denied the people who have rejected their Savior. Please – you must listen to the utterly earnest voice of Jesus.

Our culture is based on the concept of second chances. After all, is not America itself based on the dream so eloquently articulated by Emma Lazarus' poem on the base of the Statue of Liberty: "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore"? Millions of immigrants came here to start over.

Students always pester their teachers for bonus points, test retakes, and extra credit. My own mediocre golf scores would be even worse if I didn't persuade the other guys in my foursome to let me have a couple mulligans per 18 holes.

There are no do-overs after God has made his decisions. There will be no court of appeals. No hung juries. No mistrials. No stays of execution. It will be too late for petitions for executive clemency.

Abraham replied, "...between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us" (Luke 16:26).

As you believe, so you will live. As you live, so you will be judged. As you are judged, so you will be placed. As you are placed, so you will remain.

I think I know why so many people underestimate the power of God's Word, the Bible. Jesus Christ himself, the Son of God, came to earth "disguised" as one of us, walked in humility, took a lot of abuse, and died in shame. And yet it is through his wounds that we are healed.

In the same way, the Bible seems like a lot of not much. It's just words on a page. Talk, as we all know, is cheap. The Bible appears to have a string of human authors, so on the surface it looks not like God's Word but a collection of human opinions.

Jesus knows that God supervised all content, from Genesis to Revelation, and guarantees its message. And God supercharged its words with the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. Thus to read or hear the Bible is to hear the voice of God himself. Jesus thinks it's enough. In fact, he thinks that if the Bible doesn't bring people to faith, nothing will.

He answered, "Then I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my father's house, for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment." Abraham replied, "They have Moses and the prophets; let them listen to them" (Luke 16:27-29).

St. Paul said, "I am not ashamed of the Gospel, for it is the power of God for the salvation of all who believe" (Romans 1:16). That power is for *you*, to create and sustain faith in *you*. It is *able* to make you wise for salvation (II Timothy 3:15) by connecting you in faith to Jesus Christ and his marvelous gift of forgiveness.

Arguing

Ask parents to list a few things that make parenting miserable, and near the top of the list will be “Lip.” My father used to call it “back talk.”

“No, Father Abraham,” he said, “but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent” (Luke 16:30).

How often have you argued with God? How often have you chafed at his narrow way? Maybe you don’t like to have to wait. Maybe you think your suffering has gone on long enough. Maybe you have had enough of hardship and are ready for some pleasure. Maybe you’ve had enough of the wonderful discipline of poverty and are ready for the challenges of wealth for a change. “No, Father Abraham!”

Maybe you flinch at having to confess that you are “a poor, miserable sinner.” Maybe you don’t like Jesus’ claim to be the exclusive Way to God, which implies that Islam and Hinduism and Zen and Scientology are spiritual dead ends. “No, Father Abraham!”

Maybe you’re weary of being single and are intrigued by the thrill of taking the short cut to having someone to sleep with. Maybe you’re weary of a marriage that has become hard and unfulfilling and figure you deserve better. “No, Father Abraham!”

God’s heart is full of love, his mind has laid out great plans, and his Word tells you the truth. Don’t argue with him. Practice with me: “Speak, Lord – your servant is listening.”

Resurrection

We all resonate with President Teddy Roosevelt’s dictum, “Speak softly, but carry a big stick.” Power trumps talk, doesn’t it? In late 1907 Roosevelt sent sixteen U.S. battleships on a 43,000-mile journey around the globe to show off America’s growing fleet. Painted pure white with gilded scrollwork, the “Great White Fleet” forcibly made the point that America was now a first-rate military power.

Displays of power, however, do not convert people to faith in Christ. You might think that resurrection from the dead, the ultimate in miracles, would have brought everybody in Israel and the ancient Near East to faith. It didn’t happen when the “other” Lazarus was raised (John 11) nor with the resurrection of Christ himself, nor with the resurrections performed by Paul and Peter.

He said to him, **“If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead”** (Luke 16:31).

Ah, but all who *do* listen to Moses and the Prophets and who believe their message have already begun to live again. Connected to Christ, we are connected once again to the life force of the universe. His unshakable Word promises that we ourselves will rise from the dead and that we will see the resurrected Redeemer with our own eyes. His Word is enough.



STORY #2: *The Shrewd Manager*

When Jesus first told this parable, his proper hearers must have popped a vein. Jesus seems at first to be advocating criminal behavior. Actually he is doing nothing of the sort. Once you get his point, you will never forget it. The outrageous analogy between a crooked manager and the Christian life is a great illustration of how to invest God's money knowing that time is short.

Audit!

Ever been through an IRS audit? Ever gone through a comprehensive job performance review? A third-party department audit? No fun. I'm told that they are miserable experiences.

There was a rich man whose manager was accused of wasting his possessions. So he called him in and asked him, "What is this I hear about you? Give an account of your management" (Luke 16:1-2).

Either through mismanagement or through fraud, the business had lost serious money. The manager knew that the books would reveal his role in the losses, and his heart sank.

You may or may not like to hear this, but Jesus is telling you this story to encourage you to see yourself as a manager, not an owner. All your stuff is really God's, and he seems to think that you are accountable to him for the way in which you accumulate it and spend it. Is he Lord of your checkbook? Your portfolio? Your real estate? If he audited you today to analyze how you are managing his property, would you be proud or terrified?

I'm Going to Be Fired

These days when a corporate firing takes place, it's abrupt. No warning. A security guard escorts you to your desk, watches as you clean it out, takes your keys, and escorts you to the parking lot. There's a reason for that seeming coldness. A disgruntled employee can do an incredible amount of damage, either by sabotage or theft, to a company's business.

In Jesus' parable, the wealthy business owner made a critical mistake. He tipped off the manager before taking away his authority within the business office.

“You cannot be manager any longer.” The manager said to himself, “What shall I do now? My master is taking away my job. I'm not strong enough to dig, and I'm ashamed to beg (Luke 16:2-3).

The first thing the manager did well was to take the threat very seriously. He knew that time was very short, and he acted accordingly. He racked his brain to come up with a plan to use his resources quickly while he still had them.

Are you alert to the shortness of *your* time?

Making Friends

Are you an impulsive spender, or are you very intentional, a planner, in your money use? Do you have a budget? An annual income/expense summary for your household?

I know what I'll do so that, when I lose my job here, people will welcome me into their houses.” So he called in each of his master's debtors. He asked the first, “How much do you owe my master?” “Eight hundred gallons of olive oil,” he replied. The manager told him, “Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it four hundred.”

Then he asked the second, “And how much do you owe?” “A thousand bushels of wheat,” he replied. “Take your bill and make it eight hundred” (Luke 16:4-7).

Can you say “embezzlement”? This manager was brilliant. Crooked, but brilliant. Knowing that he had but hours left with control over the business accounts, he deliberately falsified the accounts receivable in order to give some very handsome gifts to his boss' customers.

Do you grasp the concept? These customers would feel a sense of obligation to him and would help him out after he was cut loose.

Kids, please don't try this at home.

The Point

Jesus' audience now expected to hear in the story that the manager was arrested and thrown into prison. But Jesus slipped in a plot twist. The boss had to laugh ruefully at his own error and admire the resourcefulness of his former manager.

The master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly. For people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than are the people of the light. I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings” (Luke 16:8-9).

The manager was commended not for his embezzlement (a crime back then as it is now), but for his foresight, speed, and willingness to invest resources in people, not himself. Note that the manager didn't just try to loot the business and run off with cash. He invested in people.

Jesus observes (sadly) that believers (people of the light) are much more naïve about money matters than unbelievers. He who never owned much of anything during his 33 years now urges you to believe his powerful principle: you lose what you spend on yourself. When you invest in human need or in the mission of communicating the Gospel, you will have everlasting satisfaction in heaven.

Internship

Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much, and whoever is dishonest with little will also be dishonest with much. So if you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches? And if you have not been trustworthy with someone else's property, who will give you property of your own (Luke 16:10-12)?

Jesus sees as a real spiritual sickness our tendency to hoard and spend for our own comforts and pleasures in the short term. We're in training right now – think of it as an internship. The Lord is always preparing you for bigger things.

That's why it is so important to cultivate integrity. *Integrity* means that you're all of one piece; that your principles are not for sale; that you treat high and low alike; that your word is good; that you are honest in public and in private, in big things and in little things; and that you don't show favoritism.

Every successful business depends on leadership development. Isn't it interesting that God is also so intensely interested in leadership development? How are you coming along?

In Cash We Trust

Learning how to be a good manager of God's stuff, especially his money, is difficult. It is learned behavior and it takes time. Our natural inclination is to love money and use people. Rapper 50 Cent's 2003 debut CD was entitled *Get Rich or Die Tryin'*. Jesus teaches us to love people and use money – see the difference?

No servant can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and Money (Luke 16:13).

Stamped on U.S. currency is the legend *In God We Trust*. This is a sad joke for many Americans, who neither believe it nor follow it. But it is a great reminder for people who take Jesus' words seriously. We can love and serve God first and use money to honor him.

Where is your trust? Who is your God?

The Last Shall Be First

One of the most curious ironies in the New Testament is that Jesus' disciples often needed help understanding his parables. They got caught up in the details and couldn't see where they fit in. It seems as though Jesus' enemies, the Pharisees, had no trouble grasping it when their ways were being condemned in his stories.

The Pharisees, who loved money, heard all this and were sneering at Jesus. He said to them, "You are the ones who justify yourselves in the eyes of men, but God knows your hearts. What is highly valued among men is detestable in God's sight" (Luke 16:14-15).

Since the Pharisees drew their members from the upper-middle class, they all had money. They encouraged each other to conclude that their money proved that they enjoyed God's favor (self-justification). Jesus added one of his trademark "backwards" statements – in God's eyes, wealth was no guarantee of integrity, nor was poverty a guarantee of God's punishment.

Though the world listens to braggarts, God prefers the humble. Though the world adores the rich and famous, the Lord lifts up the lowly. Though the world admires people with many servants, God prefers those with servant attitudes.

So tell me – whose approval are you hungry for?



STORY #3: *The Two Sons*

Thanks to this parable, the word *prodigal* has stayed in active circulation in people's vocabularies. And although it is set up referring to two boys, its timeless truths have applied to plenty of good and bad girls as well.

In Luke 15 it is the third of the stories about lost things. In the previous two, Jesus described how tenaciously people in his hearers' culture would pursue a lost sheep or a lost coin. His point: God doesn't give up easily when his children wander away from him, and his rejoicing when they come back to him is intense.

An Outrageous Request

If you know that you are in someone's will, it is considered very bad form if you appear to wish that the testator would hurry up and die. Even worse would be to ask for your inheritance before the loved one has actually expired. Jesus' opening proposition in this amazing story certainly made all of his hearers sit bolt upright.

There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, "Father, give me my share of the estate. So he divided his property between them (Luke 15:11-12).

I don't know which is more outrageous – the insolent cheek of the younger son or the incredible decision by the father to grant the request. I'll tell you what – if any of my kids would ask to cash out his or her part of my estate before I was dead, the strain on our relationship would be *severe*.

Jesus' parable highlights a central feature of human life on planet Earth. God so desires that people's love for him should be given freely that he trusts us with a huge amount of freedom, thereby allowing the possibility of grievous failure. From God's point of view, there can be no true love without major risk.

What Does “Prodigal” Mean?

Not long after that the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country, and there squandered his wealth in wild living.

Hey, if verses 11-12 sounded unbelievable, verse 13 sounds totally real. In fact it sounds like a reality TV show. If the kid actually did manage to get his hands on the cash, of course he'd live like a pig. Hardly anybody respects unearned money. In today's world the money would disappear up his nose, or at blackjack tables, or he'd be fleeced by professional female entertainers. Money always seems to attract a crowd.

After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in the whole country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything (Luke 15:13-16).

Sin always ends badly. The devil does indeed own the short term, and he can provide a blast of excitement up front. But it's all hollow; soon the brokenness and depression roll in. And isn't it amazing how fast your “friends” evaporate when your cash is gone?

Do you know anybody whose life sounds like this?

Repentance

Why does God allow us to suffer?

There are many answers to that vexing question. Here's an important one: because not all suffering is bad. Sometimes pain is therapeutic. Sometimes pain helps improve our hearing and memory. Sometimes pain helps us see our aching need for God.

When he came to his senses, he said, “How many of my father’s hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death. I will set out and go back to my father and say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.’” So he got up and went to his father (Luke 15:17-20).

Counselors know that often you have to let alcoholics bottom out before they decide that they are ready to seek help. The pain and loneliness experienced by our prodigal friend broke his pride and led him to confess his miserable sins. His empty belly assisted him in realizing how badly he had hurt his father and his God. He had only one asset left – he was still his father's son, and he humbly decided to ask for mercy.

The Bible promises you, **“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness”** (1 John 1:9). Today would be a good day for your confession.

Compassion

If this were reality TV, here's how the story would continue. "But while he was still a long way off, his father's security guards spotted him and relayed the message. The father gave strict orders that his wastrel offspring was never to set foot on the family estate again, and if he tried, the dogs should be set on him."

Here's how the Bible describes the father, your Father: **But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him, and kissed him** (Luke 15:20).

There is hardly a more beautiful description in the entire Bible of *grace*, which is God's decision to love unlovable people because of Jesus' willing death on Calvary. Jesus wants you to know that you can always count on the Father's mercy, because it is not based on your performance.

Compassion means that the father felt his son's shame and pain. And get this: he didn't make his son crawl. The father *ran* to embrace his prodigal bonehead. Wouldn't you like to be in your heavenly Father's embrace right now?

Restoration

The prodigal was hoping for a meal and maybe a shower. He got an embrace and tears from his father. But wait – it gets even better. He gets full restoration to his former place in the family.

The father said to the servants, "Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals for his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found." So they began to celebrate (Luke 15:22-24).

The father takes the same risks as before. He risks that his generosity will be abused and squandered again. He chooses to trust his repentant son and prays that he will grow up spiritually.

The reason this sounds so outrageously wonderful is that it's not how we would act. When we forgive each other, there's some begrudging. We read the riot act first. There are conditions. There is hesitation. There is hedging. We hold back. We give warnings.

Let's dedicate ourselves as individuals and in Christian groups to representing the Father as Jesus wishes: a heart aching for repentance in his wayward children, a heart leaping with joy when they turn, a heart brimming with generosity when they're back.

The “Good” Son

Alas, not all is well. The good boy is fuming.

Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. ...The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. But he answered his father, “Look! All these years I’ve been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even so much as a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him” (Luke 15:25-30).

It is a miserable fact of human nature that some bad boys and bad girls are still out in the cold because they assume that their older brothers and sisters (a.k.a. church people) judge them and despise them. The church is supposed to be the official broker of God’s mercy, but you know, sometimes the institution is as cold and suspicious as the older son in this parable.

The hypocrisy reeks. People with their lives more under control are still by nature sinful as well and need Christ’s mercy and forgiveness just as much as prodigals. And if they have stayed in church while others ran away, even that is a gift from the working of the Holy Spirit. The fuller they are of themselves, the less room there is in their hearts for Christ.

He’s Alive Again

The good son gets not a tongue-lashing, but a patient explanation of what goes on in a parent’s heart. When a young adult runs away from his or her parents’ guidance, their hearts are sick with fear. When a child comes back, it is as though he or she rose from the dead, and the sense of relief is overwhelming. Of course there will be a celebration.

“My son,” the father said, “you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found” (Luke 15:31-32).

In our work of spiritual reclamation, let us always remember that broken sinners are restored not by the Law (commandments, shame, pressure, works, incentives) but by the pure Gospel (the Father’s unconditional love, Christ’s unconditional forgiveness, the Spirit’s patient working of faith).

And when you have been a bad boy or bad girl, always remember that God’s greatest desire is to embrace you once again and give you a plate of veal, not to give you the punishment that you so richly deserve. Mercy triumphs over judgment.



STORY #4: *The Talents*

This powerful story has had a huge impact on its centuries of hearers.

It even brought a new word into English. In the original Greek, a *talenton* was a unit of wealth, an ingot of precious metal, either gold or silver. Thanks to the obvious meaning of this parable, a “talent” today now refers to skills or abilities that an individual possesses. But just as it was clear that the wealth these servants were using came from the master, so our skills and talents today are trusts from a gracious God.

The Boss Is Going Away

Somebody told me once that the true test of a person’s character is how he acts when he thinks nobody’s watching. In this extraordinary parable, Jesus gives us a peek into some of the mysteries of human existence. When he used the phrase “kingdom of heaven,” Jesus meant, “Here is how God interacts with people. Here are his priorities and goals for our lives. Here is how the King gathers people into his kingdom.”

(The kingdom of heaven) will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted his property to them (Matthew 25:14).

It is not rocket science to figure out that the wealthy man in the story is God. All believers in Christ, forgiven and restored, now work for him.

This very first verse presents two huge challenges to the sinner within each of us. First, everything we have – our money, our families, our jobs and skills, our community, and especially our dearest treasure, the Gospel of Christ – is a gift from God. How gratifying it is to our egos to suppose that we earned and built it all ourselves. But how healthy it is to give the Creator and Giver our praise for the wealth we all have.

The second challenge is to remember that God’s “absence” in our world is not because he’s weak, uninterested, senile, or dead. The truth? It gives him a thrill to entrust us with his stuff. He then deliberately steps back into the shadows to watch and see what we do with our lives. This parable now shows how *intensely* interested he is in what we do.

He Entrusted Me with a Fortune!

When you play *Monopoly*, everybody starts out with the same amount of money – \$1,500. Not in God's world. He loves diversity in his children, and it pleases him to make them all different. Nobody has everything and nobody has nothing. Everyone is gifted.

To one he gave five talents of money, to another two talents, and to another one talent, each according to his ability (Matthew 25:15a).

In the monetary system of the Greek-speaking eastern Mediterranean world, a *talenton* weighed 75 pounds. That's 1,200 ounces! Do the math. If Jesus had a silver talent in mind, it would be worth more than \$10,000 in today's money. If it was a gold talent, it would be worth more than half a million. The point: the wealthy traveler was entrusting his staff with a serious amount of money. He trusted them – both their honesty and their business aptitude.

God trusts you, too. You have been given time, skills and abilities, and money to manage. The Giver watches you earnestly to see what you are going to do with these loans. Say it with me: I have a lot. It's all his. He trusts me.

My Work Matters

One of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's best Sherlock Holmes stories is entitled "The Red-Headed League." A man with flaming red hair was hired to go to an office and copy out the Encyclopedia Britannica longhand day after day for a handsome salary. It turned out that this "work" was meaningless – a criminal had hired him simply to get him out of his house so he could dig a tunnel from its basement into a bank vault.

Then he went on his journey. The man who had received the five talents went at once and put his money to work and gained five more. So also the one with the two talents gained two more. But the man who had received the one talent went off, dug a hole in the ground, and hid his master's money (Matthew 25:15b-18).

Do you ever fear that your life has little significance? God expects no more, but also no less, than that you go to work for him with whatever talents you've been given. He is all-powerful, of course, and it's not that he *needs* our work. But it gives him special delight when we get in tune with his agenda and *choose* to work for him.

Remember what you've been praying? *Whose* kingdom come? *Whose* will be done on earth as in heaven? Every offering and tithe you give, every hour you donate, every word you speak in his service, every prayer you send to heaven *really matters*.

Well Done!

Trained animals need immediate reward, don't they? Even the very best animal entertainers get their sardine right after the trick. Kindergartners need immediate rewards, too, but you shouldn't. Still – it is hard to be virtuous when it seems that no one's looking and no one is keeping track. God wants you to know that he sees and he remembers.

After a long time the master of those servants returned and settled accounts with them. The man who had received the five talents brought the other five. “Master,” he said, “you entrusted me with five talents. See, I have gained five more.”

His master replied, “Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness” (Matthew 25:19-21).

The “five talent” servant was ready to report. His business investments and hard work had paid off. His profit for his master far outran simple interest yield. How gratifying it was to stand in his master's presence and –

- realize that his integrity and hard work had counted for something;
- bask in the master's approval;
- hear that this was only the beginning – that there were new adventures yet to come and the master wanted to use his leadership for even bigger things.

Do you suppose that God is using earth as a training ground for new adventures in heaven, and that he's building his leadership team for eternity?

That's My Story and I'm Sticking to It

Then the man who had received the one talent came. “Master,” he said, “I knew that you are a hard man, harvesting where you have not sown and gathering where you have not scattered seed. So I was afraid and went out and hid your talent in the ground. See, here is what belongs to you” (Matthew 25:24-25).

The “one talent” manager shows why the master had trusted him the least – he has the bad judgment to embarrass the master and call him a shady dealer *publicly!* But his first action was worse – he buried the money instead of doing the minimum, i.e. at least just walking it to the bank.

Why would he hide the money? Well, to steal it, of course. If he buried it, there would be no paper trail. Nobody would know he had it. If the master never returned, in time he could pretend that it was his.

How easy it is for us to play mind games like Mr. One Talent. How easy it is to look at God's stuff and say “mine.” How easy it is to forget that we were created for his service and his agenda. How good it is for you and me to have this conversation before God returns and it is too late.

Busted!

These are marks of a child: procrastination, living in dreams instead of reality, excuses, and the fantasy that the day of accountability will never come.

His master replied, “You wicked, lazy servant! So you knew that I harvest where I have not sown and gather where I have not scattered seed? Well, then, you should have put my money on deposit with the bankers, so that when I returned I would have received it back with interest” (Matthew 25:26-27).

The master saw through the excuses and judged correctly that Mr. One Talent had betrayed his trust. Money that is not invested loses its value to inflation, and so even giving it back on the day of reckoning involved theft.

The certainty of the coming final Day of Reckoning should bring about three impulses in our hearts. First, shame and embarrassment for all the times we have thought and acted like the wicked employee. Second, heartfelt gratitude for the forgiveness that Jesus brings, so that we will be spared that type of condemnation. Third, sober awareness of the shortness of time and a determination to make our lives count for something.

Don't put it off. The Day might be today.

If Only...

Take the talent from him and give it to the one who has the ten talents. For everyone who has will be given more, and he will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him. And throw that worthless servant outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth (Matthew 25:28-30).

Whew! Jesus' story certainly ends on a harsh note, doesn't it? Why do you suppose he talked to people that way? Clearly because he thinks it's imperative that people take the wrath of God seriously. People who refuse to worship him usually end up worshipping themselves.

You've probably heard any number of jokes about hell. Hell isn't funny. Jesus says that there will be weeping and teeth-gnashing – bitter regrets, self-recrimination, self-loathing, everlasting resentments against all whose “fault” it is to end up there, and hating God and oneself most of all. The worst will be for those who knew better and threw their salvation away. Imagine an eternity of “If only...”

Satan himself will not be the dark lord of hell. The Bible says that he will be prisoner #0001, cast into the lowest part, for all the evil he has done. Satan himself led the way in rejecting service to the Lord and claiming his life as his own.

Somebody in your life needs to know these things. How can you use the talents that God has given to you to share the good news of Jesus' gift?

RESOURCES AVAILABLE

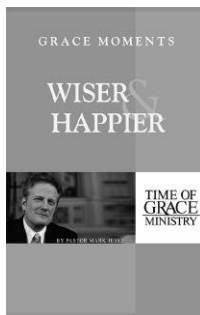


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